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THE SOCIO-POLITICAL FUNCTION OF TRADE UNIONS
AN ASSESSMENT OF POSSIBILITIES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SETTING

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Very recently, Professor Nic Wiehahn, the leading figure in the investigation which has to a considerable extent restructured South Africa's formal industrial relations system[1] stated that politics were an essential part of trade union activity. He gave the view that the present official policy of suppressing the political activities of black unions was counter-productive for the free-market system in that it allowed the initiatives for political influence on black trade unions to be taken by agencies hostile to the present South African system. He pleaded for the potential political role of black trade unions to be recognised and "channelled in the right direction."[2]

Professor Wiehahn's argument will be mentioned again in due course, but at this stage it is perhaps necessary to consider the basic assumption made by him; namely that politics are an essential function of trade unions.

1. DO TRADE UNIONS HAVE AN UNAVOIDABLE OR ESSENTIAL POLITICAL ROLE?

(By political role is meant any activity, action or policy directed at issues outside the workplace itself.)

1.1 The General Political Role.

In a general sense yes. Any institution in society which articulates the interests or concerns of large aggregates of people has a political role, whether it is formally part of its set of objectives or not. Just as the church, established welfare organisations, large sporting bodies and professional associations have political roles, so do trade union movements and employer bodies. It is necessary to detail these roles in order to discuss the political functions of trade unions in South Africa intelligently. All major institutions in society, including trade unions function "politically" in the following ways:

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1. Professor Wiehahn was Chairman of the *Commission of Enquiry into Labour Legislation*, Report R.P. 47/1979. Government Printer, Pretoria.
2. Interview in "Sake-Rapport" (Business Rapport) *Rapport*, March 14, 1982.

- the political support function:

they can influence support for or opposition to particular political parties. In Britain, the trade unions have traditionally supported the Labour Party. In Europe, just as the organised established churches encourage support for the Christian Democrat parties, so do most trade unions encourage support for Social Democrats or Socialists;

- creating loyalty and legitimacy:

even where they do not overtly support a government, major institutions like trade unions can help maintain the legitimacy of the state. Where they agree to the basic rules of societal behaviour laid down by the state (but without necessarily agreeing with particular policies) major institutions give implicit support to the system. Among their members they help to create or recreate respect for the rules of the system by their leaders being seen to operate within these rules. Where the state recognises the status and standing of the leaders of the trade union organisations and vice-versa, rank-and-file members will see an underlying unity (once again despite policy differences). In these ways trade unions or any major institutions, through the respect which their organisations command both from the state and from members, establish a chain of identification which helps maintain a wider and basic loyalty to the system. This loyalty to the system among working-class Britons, for example, is strengthened when Labour leaders become peers. A state can appeal for loyalty directly, but frequently it appeals for loyalty more effectively through major institutions, to their memberships.

This function is powerful but subtle, and is almost always overlooked by businessmen who tend to assess the effects of trade unions almost entirely in terms of public rhetoric

and industrial strategies;

- the lobby and influence-group function:

trade unions, like any other organised group, will lobby or put pressure on the government and the bureaucracy to achieve ends beneficial to their members. It most societies this lobbying process, although informal, is as essential to citizen influence on government as the franchise. This is particularly true because it is ongoing and not limited to elections once every few years. Normally, however, lobbying is more-or-less limited to the official sphere of interest of the organisation. With trade unions, the definition of the sphere of interest can vary tremendously between trade unions and government and from country to country. In the Western world it is accepted that the sphere of interest of trade unions includes not only wages, working conditions and industrial/commercial legislation but also the general welfare policies of the government. Hence trade unions are actually or potentially important lobbies across a wide range of socio-economic and socio-political issues.

1.2 More Specific Political Roles - Within the System.

Trade unions have displayed a capacity to act in more specific ways in politics. Whereas the general political role referred to above is more-or-less inevitable, a specific political function is not. The degree to which trade unions develop specific political goals and strategies depends on a variety of factors in a society. Before considering these we must look at the specific ways in which they can act:

- the blocking or veto function:
by mounting demonstration strikes trade unions, acting together, can impede, block or veto collective employer action or legislation.

In South Africa, the general strike of 1922 was a massive and violent attempt to veto the decision by the Chamber of Mines to allow the replacement of white miners by blacks (this event belongs in our following category as well, however). Despite the virtual civil war it caused, it was not a revolutionary event - it was a violent exercise in protecting and reinforcing white labour interests. Despite the initial suppression of the militant protest by the authorities, the event mobilised white support for the cause of the white workers and the government was defeated in the subsequent elections.[1)]

We have just seen a much smaller illustration of this in the "pensions strikes" in South Africa, in which a relatively weak black union movement has actually caused the state to withdraw its proposals for compulsory preservation of pensions (providing for pension fund contributions to be continuous up to the age of retirement without the right to withdraw benefits). There was more to these strikes as well, but a veto-action was one aspect.

From the point of view of the present regime this issue was certainly not very salient and not too much should be made of the climb-down on the part of government. It illustrates the point, however;

- <u>the demonstration campaign:</u>

unions can identify an issue of critical interest to their members at a particular point and demonstrate for some policy change or reform. The issues could, theoretically,

1) Jill Nattrass, *The South African Economy: Its Growth and Change*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 73-77. Nattrass points to the very significant wider effects of the 1922 rebellion in that the labour force was effectively split between whites and blacks with the whites securing a privileged status aligned with capital and in conflict with black labour interests. The event also had a deeply conditioning effect on white politics up to the present time.

cover almost anything affecting the interests of union members - subsidisation of transport, any one of a range of welfare benefits, national review of minimum wages, housing policy, etc.;

- political articulation and mobilisation:

trade unions, still operating within the ground rules of the system, can "sponsor" a political organisation or party which will operate within the "appropriate" political sphere to campaign for the interests of the class of people to which the trade union membership belongs. South Africa had a white Labour Party, sponsored by the white unions, in a coalition government in 1924 onwards. At the present stage in South Africa, the black union movement could not sponsor a political formation to operate at the parliamentary level. Legislation (the Prohibition of Improper Political Interference Act, inter alia) as well as the political and social structure of our society cuts the black union movement off from established political decision-making. The "appropriate" sphere in the case of black unions would perhaps be deemed to be the "Community Council" level. It is conceivable that a political formation could campaign in a limited way for black-worker interests at the local authority level in black residential areas, but at this stage the lack of real powers by the Community Councils and their restricted formal scope robs them of any great value as a channel for the expression of black labour interests.

In a less structured way, labour leaders can plead the cause of their members from a variety of platforms of a semi-political or informal political kind. In this role they are operating essentially in a generalised way and this kind of activity is similar to the lobby function referred to under 1.2.

1.3 Political Functions against the System.

All the roles mentioned above are reformist rather than radical in their effects. These types of activities are not geared to a transformation of political and economic structures. Even in some European countries like France, Italy and Britain, where the trade union sponsored parties are committed to the nationalisation of certain industries, the basic economic system is a mixed one which can accommodate both state and privately-owned industry, operating within the limits of a wide range of state controls on and interventions in the productive process. The goals and effects of this labour influence are not revolutionary or radical in a strict sense. This is despite the fact that many of the labour leaders mount a radical-sounding rhetoric. The tensions between the "left" and the "centre-right" in the British Labour Party, for example, show that the radical or revolutionary working class formations are considerably contained or restrained within the union-sponsored political formations.

These countries, and others like Netherlands, Sweden, etc., also have radical or revolutionary parties, supported by some but not all trade unions. This is particularly marked in Italy and France. Although the European communist parties are not completely at one on goals and strategy, their formal and informal intention is to transform the structures of their societies to bring about collective control in all spheres of the society. The trade unions which support this programme obviously can be said to be basically antagonistic to the prevailing systems. Here we should bear in mind, however, that even these trade unions, in their day-to-day functioning within the sphere of industrial relations, operate according to the rules of the system. They have a dual strategy, one short-term and one longer-term.

It is the longer-term goals of a trade union movement which are most feared by the state and by employers in South Africa.

It is necessary to examine the situation in South Africa within this context. Before doing so, however, some general relationships between labour-organisation and civil strife must be examined in a comparative, international perspective.

2. TRADE UNIONS AND RADICAL DISSIDENCE.

Having stated that organised labour can have a role in direct, radical confrontation with the state, it must be added immediately that this is by no means typical in the international setting. As Lever has once again reminded us recently, trade unions are generally a stabilising social force.[1] Here a fundamental distinction between labour disputes and political destabilisation must be made. The focus in this analysis is on the political issue. As part of a massive comparative analysis of political violence all over the world, Gurr concludes that "Labour Unions are regime-oriented in most nations, and their size relative to the non-agricultural labour force tends to vary inversely with levels of civil strife."[2] Furthermore, Gurr quotes convincing evidence produced by Kornhauser and Mayer, Neal and Seeman, Templeton and Aberbach to suggest that membership in mediating organisations like trade unions tends, if anything, diminishes workers' feelings of alienation and powerlessness, and hence their disposition to aggressive and confrontationist political responses.[3] Kerr and Ross and Hartmann in comparative surveys of patterns of industrial conflict in a wide variety of societies showed that labour protest of a confrontationist kind tends to peak fairly early in the process of industrialisation and to decline thereafter, as labour action becomes more and more a demonstration of protest rather than an attempt to disrupt the industrial system. This change has commonly been associated with the opening-up of channels through which workers feel they can obtain redress.[4] The institutionalisation of conflict through

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1) G. Lever, "Trade Unions as a Social Force in South Africa", *Industrial Relations Journal of South Africa*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1981, pp. 36-39.

2) Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 284.

3) *Ibid*, pp. 298-299.

4) *Ibid*, pp. 314-315.

recognition of labour organisations as part of the mediating system is accepted as having defused the political potential of worker grievances in most societies.

There are other reasons why trade unions are not generally found in the forefront of radical political opposition as such. As trade unionists become involved in formal procedures, and drawn into the day-to-day process of industrial relations and union management, the more they are inclined to lose a great deal of former emphasis on radical goals which they might have had. The early analysis by Michels of this tendency toward technical specialisation and bureaucratic procedures among erstwhile socialist activists is universally accepted today.[1] Revolutionary fervour becomes dissipated by the growing concern with organisational success or survival.

Furthermore, trade unions are highly visible organisations operating in a field of acknowledged conflict. In any society which represses dissidence, trade unions would be one of the first places the state would seek out dissidents. Trade unions, therefore, are more vulnerable than looser or diffuse movements like, say, activist religious sects or widespread community-based political movements. Dissident trade unionists are often the first to be eliminated in political clampdowns, and hence the leadership has to be cautious and low-keyed in its political activities.

This is particularly significant since the successful mobilisation of mass movements in confrontation with existing state systems usually requires the inculcation of a sense of an "alternative" to the established order. Michael Mann sees the failure of the working classes to be led to a collective grasp of an *alternative society*, - the final stage in the development of class consciousness - as the most characteristic factor in the defeat of the revolutionary strategy.[2]

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1) Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1915, pp. 185-188 and elsewhere.

2) Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class*, London: MacMillan, 1973, pp. 13, 68-73.

Gurr and most other analysts of civil rebellion concur that the mobilisation of guiding ideas is necessary. Trade unions, as visible organisations which are generally not formally sanctioned to operate in the political domain are in greater difficulty in articulating a revolutionary or dissident consciousness than more diffuse and more elusive movements like radical religious factions or sects, community movements or nationalistically-oriented parties. Mobilising political rhetoric stands out like a sore thumb, as it were, in the context of trade unions.

We can add to this the fact that trade unions in deeply class-divided societies operate among that section of the populace which is least confident of its ability to achieve planned ends, and also most likely to have its political vision qualified or confused by low-level economic concerns or security anxieties.[1] Hence trade unions, if they acquire dissident political goals, have to attempt to sustain those goals in the social groups which are generally least receptive to the ideological commitments and sacrifices required. They frequently have to operate without the active involvement of dissident middle-class groupings which almost everywhere are most easily radicalised. Given this, the attempts of trade unions to whip up a sustained, programmatic dissident consciousness are likely to have to be so obvious as to be strategically suicidal. The argument here is simply that trade unions are far from being the ideal political vehicle for sustained action.

These are the broad conclusions which analysts have reached after extensive examinations of the history of labour movements and civic disorder throughout the world. They must be qualified somewhat, however.

The recent Polish experience is perhaps the most immediate example of a basis for qualification. The labour movement "Solidarity" has sustained a political onslaught on the state. One must

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1) *Ibid.* (Large sections of the entire book are devoted to the analysis of factors like these in undermining the revolutionary potential of labouring classes.)

recognise immediately, however, that the mass of the Polish people, given their history, did not need a trade union movement to politicise them. Furthermore, steadily worsening management of the economy by the state and a tightening squeeze on the mass of consumers appears to have produced a pervasive anger and survival anguish which in order to erupt possibly needed no more than the channel of expression which Solidarity provided. If no other organisations are available, labour movements will most certainly provide a nucleus of structure around which dissidence will grow.

Gurr notes this qualification himself when he points out that trade union membership in South America, for example - an area where discontent is intense and widespread - correlates mildly with civil unrest.[1] More broadly, Gurr argues on the basis of a wide range of comparative evidence that where the intensity of discontent in organisations' membership remains high, all constituency-based organisations will tend towards what he calls an "expressive function." This function can be contrasted with the more usual "instrumental functions" of providing greater welfare opportunities and opportunities for participation in aspects of decision-making. The "expressive function" is essentially one of providing an outlet for politically-oriented protest and under certain conditions, organisations functioning in this way will certainly serve as a base for political action.

This is illustrated by the behaviour of some unions in the United States between the 1870's and 1930's. When federally regulated recognition to organise and bargain was granted to unions, the incidence of violent labour conflict declined to a negligible level.[2]

In broad terms, the point being made here is that trade unions offer society an opportunity for institutionalising conflict by drawing them into established and regulated processes of negotiation and bargaining. Granted this opportunity, the political

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1) Gurr, *op.cit.* p. 284.

2) *Ibid*, pp. 310-315.

threat posed by moblised labour quickly declines, because unions by their very nature are far from being ideal vehicles for political mobilisation as such. Where this opportunity is not or cannot be taken, labour organisations, along with a variety of others, will seek to change the rules of the system. The balance of evidence, however, indicates that the relatively peaceful, institutionalised process of industrial negotiation is more likely to occur than the second scenario.

Much hinges on the capacity of the state to "incorporate" labour movements into the institutionalised negotiation process. Obviously, for this incorporation to occur, there has to be some trade-off. The labour movements have to be able to secure incremental benefits for their memberships. This is possible in a growing, buoyant economy under any economic system, whether free-market or socialist. Where the structural constraints in the economy, being either low capacity for growth in production or limitations on capacity to generate increasing employment (or both) are such as to offer little opportunity for trade unions to reap benefits from negotiation, attempts to institutionalise conflict will probably fail, unless the whole system is tightly regulated by an authoritarian regime with full control over unions and management (i.e. as in some Eastern Bloc societies).

In a growing economy, the incorporation of even very militant and aggressive unions can be highly beneficial in the long run by forcing management to attain greater efficiency and profitability. The case of the formerly militant American unions is often taken to illustrate the "functions of conflict" proposed above.[1] Stagnant economies, however, cut off many opportunities for the accommodation of class conflict and leave the society vulnerable to many different forms of destabilisation.

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1) Lewis, A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956.

3. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LABOUR UNREST AND POLITICAL UNREST AMONG THE WORKING CLASS.

Many analysts draw attention to the essential difference between labour unrest as such and political unrest among the membership of unions. Strikes and labour unrest can be and should be analysed within a different framework than that suggested in the previous section, unless there are clear indications of a political dynamic in the behaviour of the workers themselves.

In parethesis, we should note the emphasis on the workers themselves. Many studies have shown that the ideology of union leadership, as opposed to membership, is frequently unrelated to the type of trade union action they advocate. In European countries, different union federations from far left to centre in terms of rhetoric and ideology behave in much the same way in the marketplace. If the labour movement is effectively part of the institutional process, the union leadership is powerfully constrained.[1] One cannot necessarily judge the political potentialities of a trade union movement from the political character of its leadership or spokesmen.

Generally speaking strikes are not effective political weapons, unless they become disengaged from specific industrial settings and take on a generalised form, i.e. as in Poland recently. An individual strike, if politically-motivated, leaves the union which may be responsible in such a highly vulnerable position, even in Western democracies, that it would be bound to weaken itself beyond repair. If a union movement uses a strike as a political weapon it can only be comforting to the state, providing a convenient opportunity to isolate the dissident organisation.

Numbers of well-researched studies show that strike-proneness in industry cannot be understood politically, but relates to a different set of factors, usually found in the characteristics of the labour

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1) See, for example, discussion in Mann, *op.cit.* pp. 37-38.

force or of labour conditions. Strike-proneness, for example, is often associated with homogeneous, low-level labour forces that live in socially isolated conditions. Hence coal miners, stevedores, textile workers and lumber workers have been shown to exhibit the homogeneity and sense of cohesion to acquire a militant or at least "active" labour consciousness but this consciousness does not automatically carry within it a political flavour or political implications.[1] The homogeneous and socially segregated black labour forces of South Africa spring immediately to mind here.

Another major point which has to be taken account of is the fact that strikes more often than not show certain kinds of relationships with aspects of the structure of working conditions at the plant level. Strikes as phenomena are to be seen essentially as part of a broader set of phenomena like absenteeism, isolated minor acts of industrial sabotage (wrecking toilets or damaging machinery) illness rates, industrial accidents or poor productivity. Often, when one is absent the other occurs. Hyman illustrates this when he says "when firms (in the U.S.A.) ... introduced severe penalties for unofficial strikers, workers turned from stoppages to go slows with considerable success ... a typical comment (from a tyre industry executive) was 'give me a good, clean wildcat any day'."[2]

Many of the labour problems in industry which appear to reflect hidden political agendas can be traced to features in the structure of employment, remuneration, control and authority in industry. Even chronically bad communication, so often loosely ascribed to "cultural" differences, either between races or classes, is frequently a symptom of something wrong in the organisation of the production process. Then again, one must bear in mind that the short strike can become part of the everyday culture of interaction in the workplace, without it being accompanied by serious

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1) See, for example, Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry propensity to strike" in A. Kornhauser, *et.al.*, (eds.) *Industrial Conflict*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1954.

2) Richard Hyman, *Strikes*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1972, p. 56. (Chapter 3 in general illustrates the point being made.)

intentions to disrupt production or the economic system - very much like the tendency of some spouses to beat each other as part of a reasonably stable and secure albeit unhappy marriage.

It is not the task in this paper to expand on the causes of strikes, but simply to make the general point that all the research evidence, even from conservative American researchers like Kerr and Siegel, points to the fact that industrial unrest as such runs according to a different pattern of cause and effect than political unrest in the labour force. To run the two phenomena together is to confuse the issue and prevent a proper understanding of either.

This point notwithstanding, there are sometimes general factors which, although not essentially political in the narrow sense, create a climate of consciousness among employees which seem to predispose them to greater industrial militancy in each individual conflict situation. These factors have to be assessed carefully for each society, but examples can be given of certain "extra-industrial" factors that aggravate labour-management conflict. The prominence of "dynastic and tradition-minded elites" in France is quoted as one example. Another is religions which disparage economic activity and lower the status of the entrepreneur. A recently urbanised labour force, not fully accepting of the norms of industrial society, can also be mentioned. The opportunities which societies allow for industrial workers to 'deflect' their aspirations onto leisure and consumption behaviour must also be noted as a factor. In this regard the general point is that workers everywhere tend to lower their expectations in order to make an adaptation to the constraints of their situation. For this process to occur most effectively, the workers should accept the broad values governing that situation. Extra-industrial factors like those mentioned above lower the acceptance of or trust in the system and can aggravate labour conflict.[1] The relevance of these factors to the South African situation must not be overlooked.

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1) See, for example, A.M. Ross and P.T. Hartman, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict*, New York: John Wiley, 1960, and Clark Kerr, *et.al.*, *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, London: Heinemann, 1962.

However, one must nevertheless not confuse these general extra-industrial factors with more overtly political motivations.

4. INDICATIONS OF THE PATTERN IN SOUTH AFRICA.

Hopefully the relevance of the general analyses above to an understanding of the South African situation should have become apparent. For reasons outlined above, our pattern of segregation and social isolation of the black labour force, our "dynastic" white industrial elites, the absence of opportunities of blacks to participate in and have knowledge of the process of government and the recent urbanisation of the labour force are all factors which result in low trust relations in our industrial setting. We should not delude ourselves that we are likely to enjoy above average labour stability during the period of our development towards a more open society. Myriad factors are likely to provide 'extra-industrial' aggravation of labour relations.

In addition to the factors just mentioned, we must also bear in mind that the limitations on life-style in our black townships, and more especially among our black migrant labour forces, prevent workers from deflecting their occupational or power aspirations into leisure behaviour or interests in consumer satisfactions. The importance of these factors in producing a stabilising consciousness - often called a "false consciousness" - among workers throughout the world has been well-documented.[1)] Conditions of housing, transport, access to facilities and amenities and Influx Control laws do a considerable amount to prevent our black workers "translating" their industrial benefits into life-style rewards. Our personnel officers start off with a huge initial disadvantage in attempting to accommodate the human aspirations of our black labour forces.

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1) See footnote 1) on page 14 of this document and also Mann, *op.cit.*

Another factor which should be emphasised is remoteness from government and administration. Our black employees have no basis on which to begin to have faith in the large, abstract systems which run all our lives. Why should they "trust" pension fund administrations, for example, when they can hardly be expected to trust labour bureaux, housing administrations, educational systems and the like. Consider the following examples of the endemic problems affecting important aspects of the everyday life of blacks. There is a huge and persisting shortage of homes to rent and accommodation in the publicly-administered townships. There have been public disputes about the reliability of water-accounts in many major townships. There are notable instances of leakages of examination questions in the black senior-certificate examinations. It is well known that a very low correlation exists between trial-matric results for black candidates and the results of the final official examinations. Recent difficulties concerning pension funds have perhaps illustrated this larger problem.

All these factors can obviously spill over to produce a politically motivated labour force within our industrial system. However, this must not be anticipated in a generalised, vague fashion, firstly because the political concerns may not be expressed in the workplace as such and secondly because the earlier analysis has shown th the emergence of recognised black trade unions may well act against political destabilisation in the labour force. Bear in mind that the comments made about the unsuitability and vulnerability of trade unions as political vehicles are particularly apposite to South Africa. A revolutionary trade unionist who acts upon his/her convictions has a very slim chance of survival in our situation.

The Centre for Applied Social Sciences is presently making an evaluation of the recent "pensions strikes" in order to gain 'hard' data on the emerging dynamics of our industrial relations system. At this stage very little empirical evidence is available, however, and what does exist is rather sketchy. Nevertheless, some very suggestive findings have emerged from a variety of research inputs. These at least allow us to begin tentatively answering the question

of how close or remote the possibilities of a "politicisation" of our industrial relations are.

Firstly, it is clear from various studies, but most especially from research conducted for the Buthelezi Commission,[1] that the black urban industrial and migrant labour forces have high and rising levels of generalised socio-political discontent. The demonstration effect of the events in Zimbabwe and earlier events elsewhere have unleashed a perception of an alternative to the present political order. Today, some 80 percent of virtually all samples of blacks, rural and urban, display verbal signs of unhappiness with the present order. Roughly 50 percent express these sentiments more intensely as "anger" or "impatience", and virtually all blacks openly discuss the possibilities of political violence or unrest. Mass strikes are seen as the most convenient specific strategy should no change in political circumstances occur in the next few years (60 percent or more people identify the mass strike as a political weapon and this is second only to the prediction of generalised violence).

This can be seen as emphatic verbal protest and not be a revolutionary consciousness. An analysis of the responses to specific items in the studies, however, suggests that some 20 to 30 percent of black people have a consistently militant orientation and reveal at least an emotional preparedness to act.

Furthermore, the research for the Buthelezi Commission shows that a dramatic change in the content of consciousness has taken place over the past 10 years. Whereas the dominant aspiration revealed in studies in the early 1970's was for reform and improvement, without comparisons with whites, today the dominant aspiration is for equality or opportunities for equality or for "social justice". The analysis by Gurr referred to earlier identifies these sentiments as indicating "relative deprivation". Gurr argues convincingly that this type of consciousness is the most common and potent accompaniment of political violence or revolutionary behaviour.

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1) *Buthelezi Commission*, Vol. VI. "The Report on the Attitude Surveys", Inkatha Institute, 1982.

These are typical findings relating to generalised political attitudes and sentiments. The same study for the Buthelezi Commission, as well as another major study undertaken by the German Bergstraesser Institute[1] reveals, simultaneously, that the same highly discontented blacks do not translate their political sentiments into a rejection of the capitalist, free-market system. From responses to a variety of questions, both direct and disguised, it is clear that the notion of factories owned by an elected black government or the discouragement of white, Indian or Coloured businessmen is supported by no more than roughly 15 to 20 percent of the black population and by the same proportion in the industrial labour force.

The pattern of responses in these and other studies tends to suggest that at this stage the (white) industrial employer is viewed by the black workers as relatively benign, compared with other agencies in their socio-political world. In a current study,[2] among black employees, roughly half of whom were discontented or highly discontented in their work situation, roughly one-third see the employers as a source of security in a financial crisis. Preliminary results in regard to the "pensions strikes" indicate that the dominant focus of mistrust among the black workers tended to be directed at government rather than at employers. The impression, at this stage, is that the perceptions did not confuse or run the employers and government together. Similarly, a recent study by Ardington and Nattrass[3] shows that, among the black unions covered in the sample, a careful distinction was made between the spheres of responsibility of the central government and those of employers in regard to the alleviation of workers' problems.

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1) Theodor Hanf, *et.al. South Africa: The Prospects for Peaceful Change*, London: Rex Collings, 1981.

2) Valerie Møller and Themba Nzimande, *Perceptions of Aging, Provisions for Retirement and Pensions among Black Workers in the Durban Area*, Durban: Centre for Applied Social Sciences, 1982. Document and Memorandum Series.

3) Elisabeth Ardington and Jill Nattrass, *A Survey of Attitudes to Labour Relations and Labour Mobility in South Africa*, Durban: Economic Research Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1981.

There is no generalised confusion of the employers and the state as could occur in a highly radicalised state of political consciousness. Other results in the research for the Buthelezi Commission show that the presence of white employers in the political world of blacks is in fact welcomed by them. The expertise and the employment opportunities brought into the system by the white entrepreneurial class is positively valued. For example, political dispensations which favour the removal of whites from the polity or the economy are vehemently rejected.

A project undertaken specifically for the Buthelezi Commission, in which a small cross-section of black trade union organisers, shop stewards and prominent rank-and-file members were interviewed personally, revealed a pattern which is fairly typical of studies in Europe.[1] Whereas a slight majority of organisers who cared to respond saw the achievement of political change as a primary goal of unionism, only minorities of shop stewards (one-third) and smaller minorities of prominent rank-and-file members (one-sixth) saw their unions as having political objectives as primary goals. Despite this, a substantial minority of rank-and-file members saw it as being necessary for unions to co-operate with political organisations (like the A.N.C. and Inkatha) but here again they did not run the two types of organisations together in a monolithic political strategy.

This is not to say that rank-and-file members interviewed, as well as the shop stewards did not display an acute consciousness of the essential conflict between management and workers. They also displayed a militant political consciousness. The researcher, Glass, in fact concludes that it is impossible ... "for blacks to separate economic and political questions ... the unions cannot resolve the workers' problems only in the factories. The unions somehow or another must find a way of resolving the non-economic questions as well."[2] However, one must remember that, simultaneously,

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1) Humphrey Glass, *Research Report on Trade Unions*, Memorandum submitted to the Buthelezi Commission, 6.7.1981, Commission Archive, Inkatha Institute, Durban.

2) *Ibid*, p. 14.

no more than one-third and one-sixth of the shop stewards and rank-and-file members respectively perceived the union as such as having a primary political role in the production situation itself at the present time.

The political goals openly being espoused by some black trade union movements - FOSATU for example[1] - must be assessed in the light of the context described above. It is not within the power of trade union organisations to carry politics as such into the workplace at the present time, given the constraints in the situation and those imposed by the workers themselves.

5. SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS.

This analysis has shown that, in the international setting, there are a number of factors which limit the tendency for and capacity of trade unions to successfully mount political strategies aimed at altering the basic rules of a political or economic system. Where they operate politically they do so within an established framework of rules and conventions. This is not to be confused with the intensity of labour unrest or frequency of strikes, which may vary according to the effect of a different set of factors; factors within the industrial setting.

One may summarise the political constraints and limitations on unions as follows:

- even militant trade unions appear to become relatively easily formalised or bureaucratised and tend, despite the flavour of their rhetoric and perhaps even their militancy vis-a-vis shop floor issues, to become part of a stable system of regulated conflict;
- even where trade union operations and structures do not accommodate the system, industrial workers in many or most countries impose constraints on political activity themselves.

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1) See Tony Weaver, "Fosatu stands committed to Socialist Struggle", *Sunday Times*, 18 April 1982, p. 29.

The general pattern in most capitalist economies is for worker-consciousness either to adapt to the limitations of class roles, or to stop short of developing revolutionary aims. Workers tend to accept the basic values and rules of the established system and their consciousness is aimed at maximising their benefits within that system;

- trade unions are inappropriate organisations for the pursuit of radical aims, due to high visibility, vulnerability and to a role-commitment to the technicalities of bargaining in the production process. They have to change their essential nature in order to become political mobilisation organisations, and such changes are signalled long in advance, and are easily identified and controlled in any society with strict security control;

- This is not to say that "radical" union leaders or even campaigns conducted within a union movement will not aim to take advantage of worker grievances in order to aggravate conflict or destabilise industry. This has happened in many countries. However, the fact is that such aims are usually pursued within a framework of grievance bargaining or industrial conflict for reasons already stated. The action does not tend to become political as such. Hence, the adequacy of structures of industrial relations in industry tend to impose limits on the effect of this kind of political motivation. The less dissatisfied workers are the less the effect of attempts to destabilise will be.

The South African situation differs from the typical "international" picture given above, in the following ways:

- black workers are drawn from black communities which have, particularly over the past few years, acquired a consciousness of an alternative <u>political</u> system. Our workers are politically much more radical than, say, European workers;
- black trade unions, while "incorporated" into the industrial relations system, are prevented by other aspects of policy from

participating in the "normal" political activities of most organised groups, etc.;

- hence a type of political activity which is essentially supportive of the democratic process is cut off from the unions in South Africa;
- therefore the incorporation of black trade unions is essentially "partial" in the South African setting, and hence less likely to secure the basic "regime orientation" of unions in most industrial countries;
- black workers may obtain redress for industrial grievances in the labour relations system but cannot achieve similar redress as regards their community conditions, nor can they "translate" their work benefits into adequate community and life-style rewards.

These factors create a situation of imbalance in which, as the research quoted has shown, black workers and trade unionists see very clearly that the shop-floor negotiation alone cannot be as rewarding for their overall interests as would be the case in a different kind of political system. Hence as Lever[1] has observed, there is and will be an increasing pressure on unions from workers to expand their scope to encompass community issues and political issues. The situation is one of great structural contradiction which, theoretically, could sacrifice chances of our society reaping the benefits of an institutionalised industrial relations system.

These factors notwithstanding, our policy-makers still have time to attempt to resolve the contradictions. Black rural and urban employee groups have not yet generalised their rejection of the system of production and nor do they reject the role of the white-owned industrial establishment. There is at this stage still a remarkably balanced awareness of the benefits of industrial growth and technological expertise. Despite mounting political anger, a basic differentiation between the private employer and the state or state-controlled system is made. The fact that so few direct

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1) Lever, *op.cit.* conclusions.

expressions of political grievance have been drawn into industrial bargaining is due in no small measure to this 'differentiated consciousness.'

Professor Wiehahn, in the reference given in the introduction to this paper, perceives the need for an expansion of political opportunity to protect the domain integrity of our industrial relations system. This analysis bears him out, and emphasises that our present relative industrial stability is due perhaps to a remarkably refined but perhaps tenuous distinction made by rank-and-file black employees. Industry's welfare depends on this distinction not becoming blurred. Therefore, it is essentially in industry's own interests to plead for reforms outside of the industrial sphere which will prevent the political process usurping the labour relations system. Businessmen themselves must attempt to assist black workers in finding alternatives for political expression which do not have to involve the trade unions or industrial relations generally.